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Spotlight on Canadians: Results from the General Social Survey

Canadians' connections with family and friends

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.	not available for any reference period
..	not available for a specific reference period
...	not applicable
0	true zero or a value rounded to zero
0^s	value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
^{p}	preliminary
^{r}	revised
x	suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
^{E}	use with caution
F	too unreliable to be published
*	significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

Highlights

- According to the 2013 GSS, 16 million Canadians or over half (55%) of people aged 15 years and older reported that they felt close to at least five family members, including those living within and outside their home.

- People had about as many close friends as close relatives. Half of all Canadians (51%) said they had five or more close friends, with very few (6%) saying they had none. In addition, 47% of Canadians reported having at least 20 "other" friends.

- Younger Canadians were more likely to report a larger social network. Canadians under 25 had a median number of 24 'other' friends, 38% higher than those aged 45 to 54, and more than twice as high as seniors aged 65 years and older.

- Canadians were just as likely to stay in regular contact with family living outside their home, as they were with friends. Eight in ten Canadians (82%) had communicated with their family on a weekly basis in the last month, similar to the proportion (83%) regularly contacting their friends.

- People were more likely to regularly connect with family by phone, while they more often saw, sent text messages, or emailed their friends.

- The large majority of Canadians (82%) were satisfied with how often they connected with family and friends.

- Canadians said that the majority of their friends contacted in the last month had the same mother tongue, were the same age, gender and education level. Few (9%) indicated that most of their friends were visibly different from them.

- Levels of life satisfaction were somewhat higher among people with more connections with family, close friends and 'other' friends.

Canadians' connections with family and friends

By Maire Sinha

Canadians' social connections and relationships are critical to their everyday life and well-being (Walton et. al 2012). Not only do family and friends provide emotional support and companionship, social networks involving family, friends and acquaintances have been linked to the availability and accessibility of resources. Often referred to as social capital, strong and diversified social networks can have positive effects at both the individual and community levels, increasing levels of self-esteem and overall life satisfaction, enhancing health outcomes, improving employment prospects, and increasing overall commitment to community (Putnam 2000; Arshad 2011, Adler & Kwon 2002, Ellison et al. 2007).

In general, there are two broad types of social capital or social connections. One set of connections known as 'bonding social capital' comprise strong emotional ties, such as with family and close friends. These relationships are often the main source of emotional support, where people feel at ease sharing personal experiences, opinions, and feelings. They can also rely on these people in times of need. Other connections known as 'bridging social capital' encompass weak ties with others that could be based on mutual interests, work relations, common friends, or other types of connections with little to no emotional support. These connections can include online-only friends, colleagues, neighbours, and acquaintances[1] and can be a key source of information on employment opportunities (Granovetter 2005).

Using the 2013 General Social Survey (GSS) on Social Identity, this report examines Canadians' social connections. Three aspects are examined 1) size of social networks (number and type of social connections), 2) frequency and types of communication, and 3) characteristics of friends. The report ends with a short discussion of the possible impact of social connections on Canadians' overall quality of life.

Size of social networks

Most Canadians had close ties to at least five family members

Family members are generally an individual's first social bonds, starting with parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended family. Throughout a person's life, the size of this family network can remain stable, reduce or even grow when individuals start their own family.

According to the 2013 GSS, 16 million Canadians or over half (55%) of people aged 15 years and older reported that they felt close to at least five family members, including those living within and outside their home. Another 23% were close with three or four relatives, 17% with one or two relatives, and 4% reported having no close relatives (Table 1).

1. The GSS on Social Identity does not include family members in this category.

Table 1
Social connections with family and friends, 2013

	Number ('000s)	Percentage
Number of relatives to whom the respondent feels close		
None	1,103	4
1 or 2	4,873	17
3 or 4	6,695	23
5 to 8	8,214	28
9 or more	7,862	27
Number of close friends		
None	1,761	6
1 or 2	5,395	19
3 or 4	6,708	23
5 to 8	8,203	28
9 or more	6,676	23
Number of acquaintances and 'other' friends		
None	1,975	7
1 to 7	4,912	17
8 to 19	6,625	23
20 to 30	6,594	23
More than 30	7,149	25

Note: Percentage calculation includes responses of 'don't know' and not stated, but are not presented in the table.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Social Identity, 2013.

Not unexpectedly, Canadians living alone generally had fewer close family connections than those living with their immediate family. In particular, 31% of people living alone reported having less than three close family members, compared with 18% of those living with a spouse[2] and children, and 15% living with their parents.

Along with close family, Canadians often turn to close friends in times of need. These are people that Canadians feel at ease with and can talk to about what is on their mind. In general, people had about as many close friends as close relatives. Half of all Canadians (51%) said they had five or more close friends, with very few (6%) saying they had none.

Together, family and close friends represent Canadians' personal network of support and companionship. This network typically totalled about 10 people.

Another set of connections comprising of 'other' friends, neighbours and acquaintances made up Canadians' wider informal network in 2013. These connections are based on weaker ties but can nevertheless provide informational support, as well as access to resources and opportunities. In 2013, 47% of Canadians reported having at least 20 of these connections, with half of these reporting more than 30 such connections.

2. Includes common-law partner.

Telephone and Internet-based Data Collection

The 2013 General Social Survey (GSS) on Social Identity was one of the first social surveys at Statistics Canada to offer an Internet option to survey respondents. This new approach to data collection was in recognition of the success of online data collection with the Census, combined with the need to adapt to the changing use of technology and the ever present demands on Canadians' time. By having both telephone and Internet modes of data collection, the 2013 GSS offered survey respondents greater flexibility and convenience in providing key and vital information to Statistics Canada.

With the 2013 GSS, households were first contacted by telephone and an individual aged 15 years or older was randomly selected to respond to the survey. This individual was then offered to continue the interview by phone or to complete the survey over the Internet.[1] Overall, one in four survey respondents completed the survey online, while the remainder completed the survey over the phone.

Moving to multimode data collection (telephone and Internet-based surveys) invariably has its benefits and challenges. Internet data collection has the possibility of increasing response rates of hard-to-reach groups, and by the same token, not offering an Internet option risks under-representing certain population groups. Furthermore, some research has suggested that the Internet mode reduces the 'social desirability' effect that can be present with telephone surveys, meaning that Internet respondents are more likely to provide candid answers compared to phone surveys (Greene et. al 2008).

In part as a reflection of the above, Internet and telephone respondents can sometimes differ in their responses. Some of these differences could be explained by interviewer effect (in the case of the telephone survey), selection bias (different modes attract survey respondents with different characteristics), or mode effect (the same respondent could provide different answers to the same questions depending on the mode used).

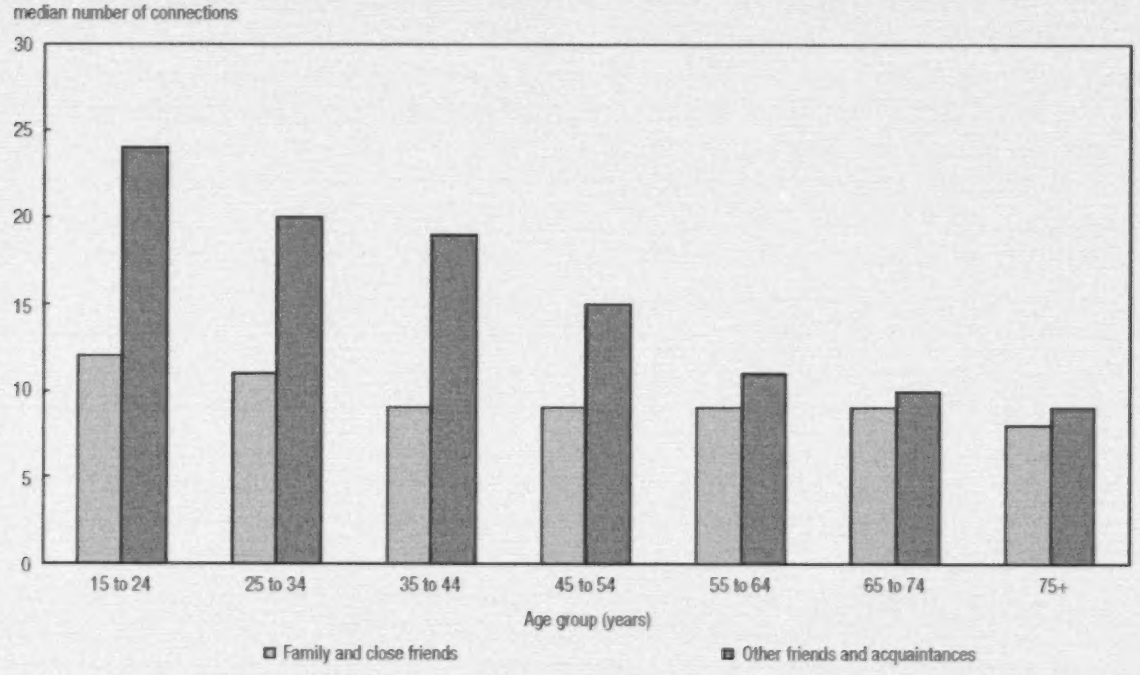
1. For a number of reasons, such as limits with technical implementation, a certain portion of respondents were not offered the option of completing the survey online. This means that the actual take-up rate for Internet option was higher. About half of survey respondents who were given the option to complete the survey online completed the Internet-based questionnaire.

Circle of friends larger for young Canadians

At every age and stage of life, social networks can facilitate life's transitions, from finding a job, meeting a spouse, selecting daycare, planning for retirement and getting help from caregivers. Although this need exists throughout the entire lifespan, the size of these networks varies by age and throughout major life cycle transitions and stages.

Consistent with previous findings, younger Canadians were more likely to report a larger social network (Turcotte and Schellenberg 2007). This is true for all forms of connections, but was most pronounced for connections with 'other' friends and acquaintances. In line with findings from the 2008 GSS on Social Networks, Canadians under 25 had a median number of 24 'other' friends, meaning half had more and half had less (Chart 1). This was 38% higher than those aged 45 to 54, and more than twice as high as seniors aged 65 years and older.

Chart 1
Median number of close family, friends and other friends/acquaintances, by age, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

This age difference was smaller for connections with family and close friends. Younger people were only slightly more likely than their older counterparts to report having greater ties to family and friends. For example, Canadians under 35 typically had around 5 close friends, slightly higher than their older counterparts who had about 4.

Possible explanations for the larger circle of friends in younger years may relate to greater opportunities for creating and maintaining friendships. This is true in the traditional sense of meeting people during recreational activities and social gatherings, but also in the virtual world of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Excluding people met through work or school, the majority (61%) of young people under the age of 35 said that they had met someone new in the last month and had plans of staying in contact with them. By comparison, 46% of people aged 35 to 44 met someone new, dropping to 41% for those aged 45-to-54, and to 32% for seniors aged 65 and older.

Further, meeting new people online was more often a reality for young people, albeit most still had their first encounter or introduction in-person. In 2013, 20% of Canadians under 35 reported meeting new people online, higher than the figure for their older counterparts (14%).

Women have greater ties to relatives; Men have more friends and acquaintances

In some ways, women and men differ in the number and type of connections. Women reported having slightly more close family connections than men (5 close relatives versus 4). On the other hand, men reported having more 'other' friends and acquaintances. A median of 19 friends was reported for men, compared with 15 for women. There were no gender differences in the number of close friends.

Canadians with higher incomes generally have a wider network of contacts

Along with age and sex, the size of Canadians' networks varies depending on other socio-demographic characteristics, including household income, labour force participation, and educational attainment. This was largely reported for connections outside of family and close friends. In particular, while household income had a negligible impact on the number of close relatives and friends, Canadians in the highest income bracket ($150,000 or more) had a network of 'other' friends that was double in size compared to Canadians with household incomes of $20,000 or less (median of 20 friends versus 10 friends).[3]

Similarly, Canadians working at a paid job or business typically had about 19 friends (excluding close ones), whereas Canadians looking for paid work had about 13 connections. Reflecting the high proportion of young people in school, networks were also highest among students, where the median number of connections stood at 24.

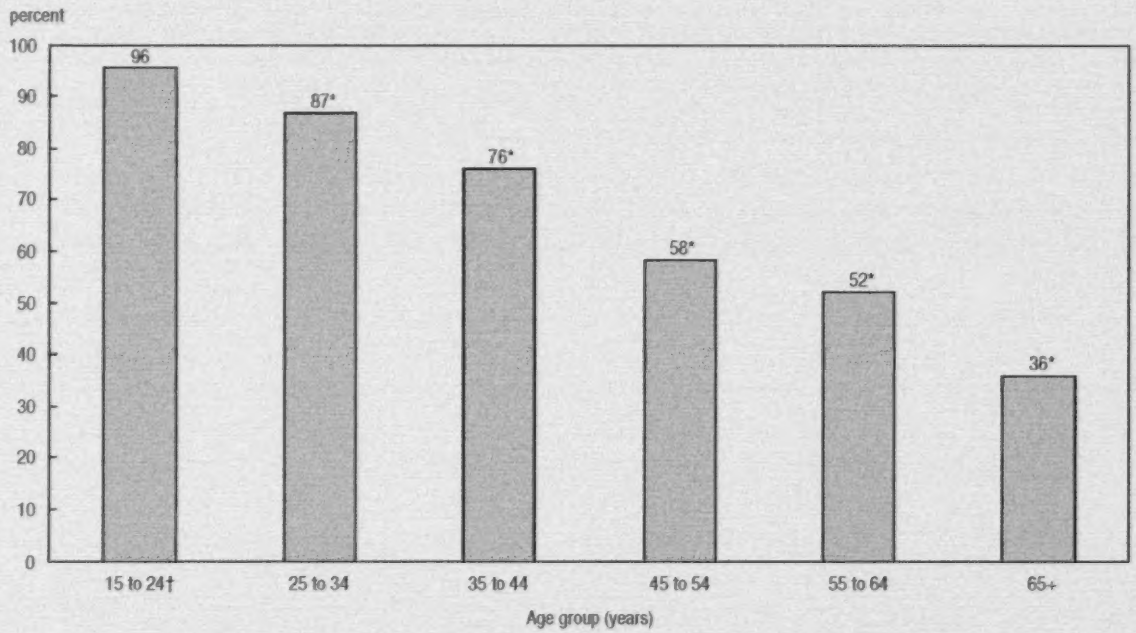
Canadians' level of education, a characteristic intrinsically linked to both household income and labour force participation, also plays a role in connections with other friends. University graduates reported having a median of 19 connections with 'other' friends, 21% higher than the median number for those with a high school diploma or less. This difference was even greater when excluding those aged 15 to 24, who may be still in school. In particular, among Canadians aged 25 years and older, the size of university graduates' network of 'other' friends was 47% larger than the network of Canadians with high school or less.

3. Given the relationship between age and personal income (whereby young people represent a large portion of low-income Canadians), the size of networks did not vary in the same way for personal income.

Use of social networking sites

For the first time, the 2013 GSS on Social Identity asked Canadians about their use of social networking sites. Among Canadians who used the Internet, seven in ten used it to access a social networking site. These sites were most popular among young people aged 15 to 24, though they were also used by middle-aged adults and seniors. A full three-quarters of Canadians aged 35 to 44 used Facebook or Twitter, as did more than half (58%) of 45-to-54 year-olds, and 36% of seniors.

Textbox Chart 1
Use of social networking sites consistently declines with age, 2013



† reference category
* significantly different from reference category
Note: Includes only those that reported using the Internet.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, allow users to form new connections online, as well as connect or reconnect with people they currently know or have known in the past, such as old classmates, work colleagues or teammates. As such, this group of people can include a range of people, from close family members, distant relatives, close friends, online-only friends, and acquaintances.

When asked how many Facebook friends they have, about half (47%) of Canadians said they had less than 150 Facebook friends, and the other half (48%) had 150 or more connections. On average, people had 228 Facebook friends, ranging from a high of 393 among 15-to-24 year olds to 54 Facebook friends among seniors.

Frequency and type of contacts with family and friends

Canadians more likely to regularly see friends than family members

Beyond the size of Canadians' informal networks, the quality of personal networks can be measured by looking at the frequency of contact with friends and family members, whether face-to-face, by phone, text, or email. When considering all forms of communication, Canadians were just as likely to stay in regular contact with family living outside their home, as they were with friends, including close friends and others.

In particular, eight in ten Canadians (82%) had communicated with their family on a weekly basis in the last month, similar to the proportion (83%) regularly contacting their friends. However, daily contact was somewhat more common among friends. In 2013, 38% of people saw, spoke to, texted, or emailed friends on a daily basis. By comparison, 30% had daily contact with their family members.

Generally speaking, Canadians were more likely to regularly see their friends than their relatives who lived outside their homes. Six in ten Canadians saw their friends at least once a week, while 43% saw their relatives[4] just as often (Table 2). The greater frequency of in-person contact with friends may be explained by the fact that close relatives may not live in the same city or local community. In 2013, 41% of Canadians said that more than half of their close relatives lived in the same city or community as them. In comparison, 58% indicated that more than half of their close friends[5] lived nearby, and 51% said the same for their other friends.

Table 2
Frequency of contacts, by type of communication, 2013

	Frequency of contact with relatives[1]	Frequency of contact with friends (close and 'other')[2]
	percent	
Overall[3]		
Every day	30	38
Once a week or more	52	45
1 to 3 times per month	16	14
Not in the last month	3	1
Face-to-face contact		
Every day	7	16
Once a week or more	36	47
1 to 3 times per month	35	28
Not in the last month	21	7
Telephone		
Every day	17	11
Once a week or more	49	43
1 to 3 times per month	24	29
Not in the last month	9	15
Text Message[4]		
Every day	18	32
Once a week or more	37	34
1 to 3 times per month	20	14
Not in the last month	24	19
Email or Internet[5]		
Every day	9	18
Once a week or more	36	38
1 to 3 times per month	29	21
Not in the last month	26	21

1. Refers to relatives outside the household.
2. Include both close friends and other friends and acquaintances.
3. Contact could include face-to-face contact, telephone, text, email and online social networks.
4. Excludes those who do not have a cell phone/mobile device or do not text.
5. Excludes those who did not use the Internet in the past month.

Note: Percentage calculation includes responses of 'don't know' and not stated, but are not presented in the table.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Social Identity, 2013.

4. Excludes family members within the same household.
5. Includes those who said that over half of their friends lived in the same city or community.

Perhaps as an alternative to face-to-face contact, Canadians phoned their relatives. Two-thirds (66%) said they had weekly conversations with their relatives over the phone, higher than the proportion (54%) of Canadians keeping in regular contact with friends by landline or cell phone.

Finally, the ease and convenience of texting and Internet communication has meant that Canadians are often opting for less traditional forms of communication, particularly to stay in touch with friends. Two-thirds (66%) of texting people texted[6] their friends on a weekly basis, with 32% saying they did so on a daily basis. Regularly emailing friends or connecting with them on social networking sites was mentioned by 57% of Canadian Internet users.[7] A somewhat lower share texted or used the Internet to connect to family (55% and 44%, respectively).

Large majority of Canadians satisfied with the frequency of connections

The large majority of Canadians (82%) were satisfied with how often they connected with family and friends. About half were satisfied and another one in three were very satisfied with the frequency of their communication. Canadians' levels of satisfaction were generally the same for their contact with family members, as it was for their frequency of contact with friends.

Although few Canadians were dissatisfied with the level of communication, the vast majority (97%) of those dissatisfied indicated that they did not connect often enough. In fact, having frequent communication with relatives and friends generally translated into increased levels of satisfaction. This was the case for connections with both relatives and friends.

Among Canadians who had daily contact with family, 91% were satisfied with the level of contact. This figure steadily dropped with less frequent contact, falling to 83% for those with weekly contact, 65% for monthly contact, and 56% for no contact in the last month. A similar drop in levels of satisfaction in frequency of contact was noted for relationships with friends, from a high of 91% for daily contact to a low of 62% for no contact in the past month.

6. Includes Blackberry (BBM) instant messaging. Excludes those who do not have a cell phone/mobile device or do not text.
7. Excludes those who did not use the Internet in the past month.

Provincial variations in size of networks and frequency of contacts

Both the size of Canadians' social networks and the amount of contact between individuals within these networks varied across Canada. Large family networks were generally more often seen in the east, as well as in the Prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta). For instance, 67% of Newfoundlanders reported close ties to at least five family members, significantly higher than the national average of 55%. Residents of Eastern Canada were also more likely than average to keep in regular contact with relatives living outside the home, while residents of the Prairie provinces did not differ from the national average in their level of contact.

Having large networks of family, close friends and other friends was lower in Quebec. Half (48%) of Quebecers said they had five or more close family members, lower than national average (55%). Although large family networks were less common in Quebec, this is not to say that Quebecers were disconnected from family members. Rather, 85% of Quebecers reported contacting any of their relatives on a weekly basis, slightly higher than the national average of 82%.

For connections with friends, both the number and the frequency of contact differed from the national picture. Quebecers were significantly less likely to report having at least five close friends (42% versus 51%) and less likely to have at least 20 other friends (37% versus 47%). While most still regularly connected to friends, they were somewhat less inclined to do so, particularly on a daily basis. In 2013, 32% of Quebecers saw, phoned, texted or emailed their friends every day, compared with 38% of Canadians overall.

Compared to Canadians overall, residents of the Prairies and British Columbia more often said they had many friends, both close friends and others. While the same was true for those on the east coast, it was mainly evident for the number of connections with other friends and not close ones.

Textbox Table

Social networks, by type and province, 2013

	Having at least 5 close relatives	Having at least 5 close friends	Having at least 20 other friends
	percent		
Newfoundland and Labrador	67*	57*	57*
Prince Edward Island	67*	54	54*
Nova Scotia	62*	52	58*
New Brunswick	59	51	54*
Quebec	48*	42*	37*
Ontario	56*	53*	49*
Manitoba	61*	56*	50
Saskatchewan	65*	54*	51*
Alberta	60*	54*	52*
British Columbia	54	57*	49*
Canada†	**55**	**51**	**47**

† reference category

* significantly different from reference category

Note: Percentage calculation includes responses of 'don't know' and not stated, but are not presented in the table.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Characteristics of friends

Canadians generally befriend people with similar backgrounds

Previous research has suggested that people tend to select and associate with others that have similar backgrounds (Bahns et. al 2012; McPherson et. al 2001). Data from the 2013 GSS support these findings, though some variations existed across demographic groups.

Overall, Canadians said that the majority of their friends contacted in the last month[8] had the same mother tongue, were the same age, gender and education level (Table 3). Few (9%) indicated that most of their friends came from an ethnic group that was visibly different from theirs.[9]

Table 3
Canadians' connections with friends, by selected characteristics, 2013

	Most or all friends have/are...				
	Same mother tongue	Visibly different	Same gender	Same age	Same education
	percent				
Sex					
Male†	81	9	51	66	54
Female	83*	8	63*	67	58*
Age group					
15 to 24†	81	14	48	84	74
25 to 34	82	11*	56*	75*	58*
35 to 44	81	9*	62*	68*	54*
45 to 54	82	8*	60*	61*	53*
55 to 64	84*	6*	60*	58*	52*
65 and older	81	6*	56*	54*	48*
Visible minority[1]					
Visible minority†	61	25	62	67	60
Non-visible minority	86*	6*	56*	66	55*
Aboriginal identity					
Aboriginal†	83	10	51	57	46
Non-Aboriginal	82	9	57*	67*	57*
Immigrant status					
Immigrant†	61	17	60	61	57
Non-immigrant	87*	7*	56*	68*	56
Mother tongue					
English (only and with non-official language)†	90	8	57	67	57
French (only and with non-official language)	87*	5*	55	66	53*
Both English and French (and with non-official language)	82*	11	48*	73	60
Non-official language only	53*	16*	62*	64*	57
Census metropolitan area (CMA)					
CMA†	79	11	57	68	58
Non-CMA	88*	5*	56	62*	52*
Total	**82**	**9**	**57**	**66**	**56**

† reference category
* significantly different from reference category
1. Excludes Aboriginal people.
Note: Percentage calculation includes responses of 'don't know' and not stated, but are not presented in the table.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

8. Includes close friends and 'other' friends.
9. Visibly different ethnic background is based on the respondent's own interpretation. It does not necessarily refer to different visible minority groups.

The tendency to maintain friendships with similar people was true for both men and women. Men, however, were more likely to report having friends that were the opposite sex. In 2013, 49% of men indicated that at least half their friends were the opposite sex, while the same was true for 37% of women.

Both men and women had friendships with similarly aged people, though age mattered less as people grew older. In particular, 54% of those 65 and older said that most or all of their friends were the same age. This compared to 68% of 35-44 year-olds, and 84% of young adults less than 25. These age-based patterns in friendship may be related to the types of contacts people have at various stages of their life. Young people's connections are primarily formed at school with similarly-aged people, while others tend to meet in more age-diverse settings, notably workplaces.

Despite young people's decreased likelihood to report older people as friends, they were more likely to have many friends who came from an ethnic group that was visibly different. For instance, 14% of Canadians under 25 reported that most or all their friends were visibly different from them, compared to 9% of those aged 35 to 44, and 6% of those aged 55 to 64. Young people's higher likelihood of maintaining friendships with visibly different people may partly reflect the fact that the visible minority population is younger than the overall Canadian population (Statistics Canada 2013).

Characteristics of friends somewhat differ between those living in CMAs and non-CMAs

The choice of friends is inevitably influenced by people's exposure to the same or different types of people. In large heterogeneous communities, the opportunities to meet and maintain friendships with people of different backgrounds are generally higher, as compared to smaller, more homogeneous communities.

According to the 2013 GSS, people living in census metropolitan areas (CMAs) were somewhat more likely than other Canadians to report friendships with those who were visibly different from themselves and who had a different mother tongue. Notably, approximately one in ten CMA residents said that the majority of their friends had a visibly different ethnic background, twice as many as those living outside a CMA (11% versus 5%). This difference was even greater for the two CMAs with the highest proportion of visible minorities: Toronto and Vancouver.[10] Residents in these two CMAs were three times as likely to report that most of their friends had a visibly different ethnic background (15% versus 5%).

On the other hand, Canadians living in CMAs were somewhat more likely than other Canadians to maintain friendships with people that were the same age and had the same levels of education. In 2013, 68% of residents in CMAs indicated that most of their friends were the same age, slightly higher than the proportion (62%) reported by those living in a non-CMA. While having the same education was not as important as age, 58% of Canadians living in a CMA reported that most of their friends had the same levels of education, compared to 52% of non-CMA residents.

One characteristic of friendship held constant for both CMA and non-CMA residents: the gender of friends. About six in ten of each group said most of their friends were the same sex.

Friendships with different ethnic groups more common among visible minority population

Just as diverse communities can afford greater opportunities for diverse friendships, an individual's ability to select similar-type people may be more limited depending on their own background. The visible minority population in Canada may be one such example. While the visible minority population is growing at a faster pace than the total population, visible minorities still represent a smaller share of Canada's total population: 19% in 2011 (Chui and Maheux 2011; Statistics Canada 2013). Their smaller share of the population, combined with the diversity within this population, may help explain the greater tendency among visible minorities than others to report that their friends were visibly different from themselves.

10. According the 2011 National Household Survey, the visible minority population represents 47% of the population of Toronto and 45% of the population of Vancouver.

More precisely, one-quarter (25%) of the visible minority population indicated that most or all of their friends come from an ethnic group that was visibly different from theirs. This was four times higher than the proportion (6%) reported by the non-visible minority population.[11] Overall, the visible minority population was also less likely to say that most of their friends had the same mother tongue (61% versus 86%).

As the majority of visible minorities are immigrants,[12] it is not surprising that friendships for immigrants followed a similar pattern. Immigrants were nearly 2.5 times as likely as Canadian-born individuals to report that most friends came from an ethnic group that was visibly different from theirs, and more likely to have friends with a different mother tongue.

Having a majority of friendships with visibly different people was also more common among people whose mother tongue was a non-official language. They were twice as likely as those who first spoke English or French to have many friends who had a visibly different ethnic background (16 % versus 8% and 5%).

This gap was even wider when considering connections to people with the same mother tongue. Just over half (53%) of people who first spoke a non-official language reported that most of their friends had the same mother tongue as them. This contrasts the pattern for those who first spoke either English and French, where the vast majority indicated that most of their friends spoke the same mother language as them (Table 3).[13]

Despite the higher likelihood of having many friends with a visibly different background and different mother tongue, the three interrelated groups - visible minorities, immigrants, and individuals with a non-official language as a mother tongue – shared many similarities with other Canadians. Consistent with the overall picture, the majority of their friends were the same age and sex as them, and had similar educational backgrounds.

Social connections and well-being

Greater family and friend connections tied to higher levels of life satisfaction

At least to some extent, data from the 2013 GSS appears to reinforce the idea of social capital or the link between social networks and positive outcomes on quality of life. More specifically, levels of life satisfaction were somewhat higher among people with more connections with family, close friends and 'other' friends.

In 2013, 86% of Canadians who had close ties with five or more relatives were satisfied with their lives[14], while the same was true for 75% of people with one to two close family members, and 69% for those with no close relatives.

Having more close friends was also tied to higher levels of satisfaction, as was connections with other friends. However, for the latter, levels of life satisfaction reached a plateau with eight connections, meaning there were no differences between people with eight other friends and those with 20 or more.

Regardless of age, people with more family and friend supports were generally more likely to be in very good or excellent physical and mental health. Among Canadians under 35, high levels of self-rated physical health were reported by 73% of those with at least five close friends and 56% with no close friends. The same pattern was seen at the other end of the age spectrum. Over half (56%) of seniors with many close friends rated their physical health as very good or excellent, compared to 33% of seniors with no close friends. It is important to note that forming or maintaining ties with family and friends may be more difficult for Canadians with poorer levels of physical and mental health (Turcotte and Schellenberg 2007).

Along with the number of family and friends, the frequency of communication also played a role in overall happiness and health. For instance, keeping in touch with friends on a regular basis generally meant higher levels of satisfaction. In 2013, 84% of people who either stayed in daily contact or weekly contact with their friends were satisfied with their life. The same was true for 69% of those who did not have any contact in the last month.

11. To a somewhat lesser degree, the same pattern was evident among CMAs with a high proportion of visible minorities. For instance, in Toronto, 25% of the visible minority population said the majority of their friends were visibly different, compared to 8% of the non-visible minority population.

12. See Chui and Maheux, 2011.

13. This held true even when controlling for immigrant status. That is, immigrant and Canadian-born people whose mother tongue was a non-official language did not significantly differ in their lower likelihood of identifying most friends as having the same mother tongue.

14. Satisfaction with life is based on a self-reported scale from 0 to 10. Canadians rating their life as 7 or higher were considered satisfied with the lives.

Summary

In 2013, Canadians reported a range of connections. Most often, Canadians felt close to at least five family members, as well as to five or more friends. Canadians' network of other friends, such as acquaintances, was noticeably larger. Almost half of all Canadians had at least 20 other friends, though significant variations existed across age groups, income levels, types of main activity, and education levels.

Canadians were just as likely to stay in regular contact with family living outside their home, as they were with friends, including close friends and others. Canadians were more likely to regularly connect with family by phone, while they more often saw, sent text messages, or emailed their friends.

In line with previous research, Canadians tend to have friendships with similar people. This was true across socio-demographic groups, though visible minorities, and immigrants were more likely to maintain friendships with those who were visibly different.

There is some evidence to suggest that people's connections to others have a positive role on their lives. In general, Canadians with a greater number and frequency of connections to others, whether family or friends, are happier and healthier.

Data source

This report is based on Cycle 27 of the General Social Survey (GSS) on Social Identity, conducted in 2013. The target population included all persons 15 years and older living in the ten provinces of Canada, excluding full-time residents of institutions. In 2013, two modes of collection were offered to the respondents: interview by telephone and an electronic questionnaire.

Once a household was contacted by telephone, an individual 15 years or older was randomly selected to respond to the survey. This individual was then offered to continue the interview by phone or to complete the survey over the Internet. A certain portion of respondents were not offered the option of completing the survey online, for a number of reasons, such as limitations on technical implementation (i.e., too late in the survey cycle to offer Internet mode).

The sample size in 2013 was 27,695 respondents. Of which, 6,907 completed the survey online.

Data collection

Data collection took place from June 2013 to March 2014. Computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and Electronic (Internet) Questionnaire (EQ) were used to collect data.

Respondents were able to provide responses in the official language of their choice.

Response rates

The overall response rate was 48%. Types of non-response included respondents who refused to participate, could not be reached, or could not speak English or French. In 2011, about 2% of the Canadian population could not speak either official language. Survey estimates were weighted to represent the non-institutionalized Canadian population aged 15 years or over.

Data limitations

As with any household survey, there are some data limitations. The results are based on a sample and are therefore subject to sampling error. Somewhat different results might have been obtained if the entire population had been surveyed. This article uses the coefficient of variation (CV) as a measure of the sampling error. Any estimate that has a high CV (over 33.3%) has not been published because the estimate is too unreliable. In these cases, the symbol 'F' is used in place of an estimate in the figures and data tables. An estimate that has

a CV between 16.6 and 33.3 should be used with caution and the symbol 'E' is referenced with the estimate. Where descriptive statistics and cross-tabular analysis were used, statistically significant differences were determined using 95% confidence intervals.

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